

**Soetendorp Symposium: February 26, 2008**  
**The Insolent Waters: Moral Choices for an Endangered Planet**

**Water for Peace: from Conflict to Resolution**

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Water evokes countless and contrasting metaphors and images; these images are laden with conflict and evocative of hope and peace. Think of storms on the oceans, nature's most powerful and uncontrollable force, sunrise on a calm lake, bringing a new day full of possibilities, the floods that beset New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina, bringing misery, damp, filth, and tensions lasting to this day, the sparkling cleanness of the forest after a heavy rainfall, parched fields, riven with cracks after a long drought, and a community joyfully gathered around a new well, telling stories and full of laughter.

But when my thoughts turn to Awraham Soetendorp, it is his compassionate tears that I think of.

His tears evoke the unspeakable pain of conflicts, past and present, and their stormy memories. He speaks of memories of Europe's darkest days, the child hidden by kind people during the Holocaust. His courage leads him to weep and speak of the pain of both the Israeli and Palestinian people, as he gazes with hope across the Dead Sea. He never forgets the often forgotten conflicts that trap people in too much of Africa in misery.

His tears also rise when he speaks of the unbearable pain of poverty. He points to the misery of hunger, of children lost, of shattered hopes. He speaks of the desperation of thirst, thirst for water, thirst for knowledge and understanding, and thirst for spiritual meaning and love. Poverty can be as painful as war, as unforgiving and as unjust.

And his tears flow in pain for man's abuse of the earth, the parched land, the slashed forests, the gash of greedy mining ventures. And for polluted waters, misuse of rivers and lakes and the sea so that God's gift of the waters becomes a source of conflict to the point of war. We know well today that water, which is the source of life, is becoming a source of war and death as it is wasted and destroyed.

But Rabbi Soetendorp's tears give way to hope, determination, and action: hope that under mankind's conflicts and tensions there is a common will for peace, a determination that the promise of ending poverty in our lifetime can become a reality, and for action to keep the spirit of the Earth Charter, which he helped to inspire, always at the center of focus.

What is remarkable in this vision is the deep understanding of how these three often separated strands are woven together. Anger, conflicts, phobias, and wars go with poverty and above all ignorance and injustice. They also are the companions of abuse of the earth and nature's gifts. The human spirit cannot thrive in times of conflict and is thwarted by wars and tension, by distorted memories and hatreds. Nor can it thrive without the gifts of nature, whether to meet the needs of thirst, to provide the most basic needs for food, and the quality of decency and to appreciate the meaning of life. From the most mundane – handwashing as the most powerful public health tool we know today – to the most elevated – in the contemplation of beauty and spirit that is so tied to water – care for nature is fundamentally part of the effort to fight poverty.

Rabbi Soetendorp is one of the most powerful proponents anywhere of the Millennium Development Goals, that remarkable and unprecedented covenant that binds all the world's nations to fight poverty, both as a road to peace and as a way to unlock the human spirit. He

knows well the Myriad and complex moral choices that the Millennium Covenant implies and still more the effort it calls forth, to solve both ethical choices and practical problem. He calls for open and purposeful dialogue to move forward, always with respect for each individual and for their diversity of views, but always with determination to act.

One of mankind's most enduring and treasured stories is the journey of Noah's Ark. It combines the three strands that exemplify the mission of Rabbi Soetendorp. Men fought and dissipated opportunities, abused the land and the law, and ignored the needs of fellow man. The rains came and the flood waters wiped out the evil. Noah and his ark, which brought all creatures together in a miracle of diversity and cooperation, showed what is possible with need, will, and God's help. Their lonely and fearful journey across the vast waters exemplifies man's vulnerability and loneliness. Disappointments succeeded one after another but they did not give up. But then, the dove returned with the olive branch that has come to symbolize hope, life and peace. The story ends with the new beginning, a new life of fertility and a renewed covenant.

Awraham Soetendorps' commitment, born of values and vision, his courage of memory and hope for the future, his strength and determination born of compassion, respect, and care, are what we need to resolve conflicts, end poverty and bring about true equity, and preserve the planet. May we all be blessed and inspired by his example.